

## "If ponies rode men and grass ate the cows"

Just What Tune was in the Air when  
The World Turned Upside Down?

by [Dennis Montgomery](#)

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A University of Memphis graduate, he spent a two decade career with The Associated Press. His professional progress was interrupted only by a National Endowment for the Humanities journalism fellowship at the University of Michigan.

He left the AP to begin research for *Starving Time*, a manuscript on Jamestown anthrophagia; edited a country weekly and a small-town daily; and became Colonial Williamsburg's senior staff writer. Now working for himself, he writes video scripts, magazine pieces, website copy, and promotional items for Colonial Williamsburg, guest edits "Colonial Williamsburg, the Journal of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation," and contributes stories to a handful of business publications.

Montgomery has published the biography of Colonial Williamsburg's founder, "A Link Among the Days: The Life and Times of the Rev. Dr. W. A. R. Goodwin." Currently, he is at work on a history of Lancaster County, Virginia, a children's book about Jamestown colonist Henry Spelman, a biography of St. George Tucker, and other Virginia-history projects.

The father of five daughters, he is married to Joyce Savedge Dunlop, a descendant of a 1608 Jamestown settler, as well as the 18th-century Surry County tobacco factor and Loyalist, Archibald Dunlop.

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Name the song the British bands played when General Charles Cornwallis surrendered to General George Washington at Yorktown in 1781. Yes, it's a trick question, and, tick . . . tick . . . tick . . . time's up. If you said "The World Turned Upside Down," chances are good you are wrong. The correct response is: No one knows for sure.

"No one knows for sure" is probably not what the teachers or textbooks taught you in American History 101. Almost certainly not what you learned in grammar school, either.

On the academic hit parade of patriotic music "The World Turned Upside Down" is up there in the top ten with the "Star Spangled Banner" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." It's so apropos for the historical event; the world's most potent military power is trounced by a bunch of farmers, shopkeepers and overdressed Frenchmen in a battle that all but ends the Revolutionary War. A few bars of "The World Turned Upside Down" are perfect for the occasion. Maybe too perfect.

There is no reliable evidence the British played a "The World Turned Upside Down" song that October 19th, and if someday someone somehow discovers proof they did, we aren't likely to know which of "The World Turned Upside Down" songs it was.

That may explain another difficulty with the ditty. Think for a moment: Is there a song more famous that almost no one knows? Everyone is good for a couple of bars of "Oh,

say can you see . . .," or "Mine eyes have seen the glory . . ." Who do you know who can whistle a note of "The World Turned Upside Down?" Ever even heard "The World Turned Upside Down?" Didn't think so.

Wonder why?

Well, let me tell you.

"The World Turned Upside Down" tradition, which may be all that it is, begins with another capitulation-Charleston, South Carolina's on May 13, 1780. It is root and branch of the unconditional-surrender terms the victorious British general, Sir Henry Clinton, imposed on the losing American commander, General Benjamin Lincoln of Massachusetts.

Eighteenth-century customs of war usually did the vanquished the honor of allowing him to march out of his lines to lay down his arms with his flags flying and his band playing a march from the victor's national book of martial melodies. But Clinton dishonored Lincoln by requiring the Americans to keep their colors cased and forbidding them to play an English or German air.

Remember Lincoln's name because he's going to show up center stage at Yorktown. Fast forward to October 17, 1781 and the earthworks, trenches, and redoubts from which the Americans and French bombarded the British and Germans in Virginia. That morning Ensign Ebenezer Denny of Connecticut:

*"...had the pleasure of seeing a drummer mount the enemy's parapet, and beat a parley, and immediately an officer, holding up a white handkerchief, made his appearance outside their works; the drummer accompanied him, beating. Our batteries ceased. An officer from our lines ran and met the other, and tied the handkerchief over his eyes. The drummer sent back, and the British officer conducted to a house in rear of our lines. Firing ceased totally..."*

The blindfolded Englishman carried a memorandum from Cornwallis to Washington. It read, "I propose a cessation of hostilities for 24 hours, and that two officers may be appointed by each side, to meet at Mr. Moore's house, to settle the terms for the surrender of York and Gloucester." Gloucester was the British stronghold on the north shore of York River, opposite Yorktown.

Washington permitted Cornwallis two hours to reduce his proposals to writing, and, among other things, said: "The same Honors will be granted to the Surrendering Army as were granted to the Garrison of Charles Town." Benjamin Lincoln, by the way, was now Washington's second in command.

Dickering, the belligerents agreed to send commissioners the next morning to Augustine Moore's two-story clapboard just east of the line of fire to commit the terms to paper. Probably in the first-floor parlor, to your right or east as you enter the riverside door, Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Dundas and Major Alexander Ross, representing Cornwallis, negotiated the details with Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, representing the Americans, and Viscount de Noailles, representing America's ally, the French, commanded by the

## Count de Rochambeau.

Dundas and Ross belabored every provision. The negotiations, which Washington expected to be concluded by noon-how much was there to talk about- consumed the day. In its course, Ross told Laurens, who had been with Lincoln at Charleston, that a passage in Article Three was harsh. It read: "The garrison of York will march out to a place to be appointed in front of his posts, at two o'clock precisely, with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British or German march."

"Yes, sir," Laurens said, "it is a harsh article." Ross said Clinton, not Cornwallis, was responsible for the Charleston affront, and suggested Article Three's comeuppance missed its mark. Laurens said, "This remains an article or I cease to be a commissioner." While three armies waited for the four-man palaver to conclude, Denny wrote:

*"...Several flags pass and repass now even without the drum. Had we not seen the drummer in his red coat when he first mounted, he might have beat away till doomsday. The constant firing was too much for the sound of a single drum; but when the firing ceased, I thought I never heard a drum equal to it-the most delightful music to us all..."*

American Brigadier General Henry Knox wrote that day to his wife: "They will have the same *honors* as the garrison of Charleston; that is they will *not* be permitted to unfurl their colors or play *Yankee Doodle*."

So, but for the discourteous Clinton, the British might have tooted revolutionary America's de facto anthem, and, 218 years later, Yorktown historians would not be playing "Name That Tune."

The next day, the 19th, as Denny reported, "Our division man the lines again. All is quiet. Articles of capitulation signed . . . The British army parade and march out with their colors furred; drums beat as if they did not care how. Grounded their arms and returned to town."

Denny says nothing of what the drummers beat, nor, as he had the day before, did he describe the sound as music. Nor did he mention a British band. Nor did anyone else.

An American surgeon, Dr. James Thacher, described "the conquered troops in a slow and solemn step with shouldered arms, colors cased, and drums beating a British march." Lieutenant Colonel "Light-horse" Harry Lee, confided to his memoirs: "At two o'clock in the evening the British army, led by General [Charles] O'Hara, marched out of its lines with colors cased, and drums beating a British march." No band, no "The World Turned Upside Down," just drums playing a march Lee and Thacher recognized as British.

Johann Conrad Doehla, a German soldier, wrote that fifes played. Fifeing was so common to such marches that other men who wrote of the surrender may have deemed its mention superfluous. On the other hand, just one of them neglected to point out the just-as-ordinary drums. In any case, Doehla names no tune.

No description written at the time by someone there has come to light that names any melody the British drummed, fided, played, or hummed to themselves.

John B. Mitchell, now a Colonial Williamsburg interpreter and once a National Park Service historian at Yorktown, studied "The World Turned Upside Down" question, and produced a monograph on his findings in 1961. He said: "No positive information exists regarding this particular tune being played at Yorktown."

Moreover, he wrote, "None of the contemporary accounts mentions a band serving with the defeated army, nor are there any band instruments listed among the spoils of war." Mitchell, however, found 79 musicians on the prisoner-of-war rolls-men who played bugle-like trumpets and clarinet-like hautbois, both ill-suited for carrying alone or together the tune of any version of "The World Turned Upside Down." He thought the 79 might represent the nuclei of eight otherwise-unnoted, but usually standard ten-man regimental bands fleshed out with more flexible valved horns and bassoons.

It was uncommon among British regiments to have official bands, but common for them to have bands-official being the operative word. They hired civilian musicians for accompaniment, men who seem to have come with their own instruments. The regiments showed recruits on their rosters as regular soldiers. Fifers and drummers-the British turned over at least 137 fifes and drums-were so listed in the rank-and-file at Yorktown. The articles of capitulation allowed defeated soldiers to retain private property, which could explain the absence of other instruments in the spoils.

From Colonel St. George Tucker, serving with the Virginia Militia, we know the British had some means to play popular ballads during the siege of Yorktown and had at least one other instrument. On the 19th, Tucker wrote, "This morning at nine o'clock the articles of capitulation were signed and exchanged. At Retreat beating last night the British played the tune of 'Welcome Brother Debtors' - to their conquerors the tune was by no means disagreeable." Elsewhere, he logged a British bagpipe serenade.

American and French bands attended the surrender. No question. If they played, however, their songs are not noted either. So to speak. But no one has accused the allied music men of mocking the vanquished with "The World Turned Upside Down." Accounts of the Franco-American forces' behavior say, without mentioning bands specifically, that they were silent.

Whoever played what, when, on which instruments, there was time for more tunes than one. About 3,500 soldiers-all of the 7,247 British and Germans in the official returns healthy enough for duty-paraded out of Yorktown to stack their arms that afternoon. They crossed the 200 or so yards of shot-plowed ground between their works and the one where Washington waited-near today's national cemetery on the old road to Hampton. It's about a mile and a half from there to the surrender field where they piled their muskets before filing back to the city. So large a procession, covering four miles or more round-trip, took longer than a song.

Among those who watched the British pass was Aedanus Burke. He wrote that day to Arthur Middleton of songs in the plural:

*"...They marched through both armies in a slow pace and to the sound of music, not military marches but of certain airs which had in them so peculiar a strain of melancholy and which . . . excited sentiments far*

*different from those I expected to enjoy..."*

Several popular tunes that the British, Americans, and French would be expected to know contained the lyric "the world turned upside down," though they were not so titled. At least one so titled did not contain the words. Burke didn't say whether he heard any of them, and we can't either.

Lee - he fathered the Robert Edward Lee who would direct the refortification of Yorktown in 1861 - described thusly the British on parade:

*"...The road through which they marched was lined with spectators, French and American. On one side the commander-in-chief, surrounded by his suite and the American staff, took his station; on the other side, opposite to him, was the Count de Rochambeau, in like manner attended. The captive army approached, moving slowly in columns with grace and precision. Universal silence was observed among the vast concourse, and the outmost decency prevailed: exhibiting in demeanor an awful sense of the vicissitudes of human life, mingled with commiseration for the unhappy. The head of the column approached the commander-in-chief; O'Hara, mistaking the circle, turned to that on his left for the purpose of paying his respects to the commander-in-chief, and requesting further orders; when, quickly discovering his error, with much embarrassment in his countenance he flew across the road, and, advancing up to Washington, asked pardon for his mistake, apologized for the absence of Lord Cornwallis, and begged to know his further pleasure. The General, feeling his embarrassment, relieved it by referring him with much politeness to General Lincoln for his government. Returning to the head of the column, it again moved under the guidance of Lincoln to the field selected for the conclusion of the ceremony..."*

You remember Lincoln.

Colonel Fontaine of the Virginia Militia, writing a week after the event, said:

*"...I had the happiness to see that British army which so lately spread dismay and desolation through all our country, march forth . . . at 3 o'clock through our whole army, drawn up in lines about 20 yards distance and return disrobed of all their terrors, so humbled and so struck at the appearance of our troops, that their knees seemed to tremble, and you could not see a platoon that marched in any order. Such a noble figure did our army make, that I scarce know which drew my attention most. You could not have heard a whisper or seen the least motion throughout our whole line, but every countenance was erect, and expressed a serene cheerfulness. Cornwallis pretended to be ill, and imposed the mortifying duty of leading forth the captives on Gen. O'Hara..."*

Not before 1822 - 41 years after Yorktown - was "The World Turned Upside Down"

associated in print with the surrender. It seems to have been in volume two of *Anecdotes of the American Revolution* by Alexander Garden. Historian Douglas Southall Freeman, a careful scholar, wrote in volume five of his Washington biography in 1952 that the story appeared first in 1828 on the pages, symmetrically enough, of the Charleston edition of the second series of Garden's work. Otherwise, historians agree the report is secondhand, thin, and doubtful.

A second source is Yorktown soldier Asa Redington who said near the end of his 83 years: "The British bands played that old tune about the world being turned upside down." By then, however, Garden's report was widespread and potent enough to influence aging memories, the fitness of the tune for the moment in time having become popularly apparent.

A National Park Service information sheet provided to Yorktown visitors today says, "At no time during the 1700s was there a song entitled 'The World Turned Upside Down.'" But there is more to that pronouncement than meets the ear.

Mitchell and others report that by 1632 the English sang a song named "Marry Me, Marry Me, Quoth the Bonny Lass," with a melody so agreeable it often was refitted with lyrics for more recent occasions. In 1646, for example, the tune acquired the words of a song titled "The World Is Turned Upside Down."

That song protested against what the writer feared would be the deleterious impact of Protestant Oliver Cromwell's victory at the Battle of Naseby in 1645 on the traditional observances and merrymaking of the English Catholic Christmas. The first verse went:

*Listen to me and you shall hear,  
News hath not been this thousand year:  
Since Heros, Caesar, and many more,  
You never heard the like before.  
Holy-days are despis'd,  
New fashions are devis'd.  
Old Christmas is kickt out of Town.  
Yet let's be content, and the times lament,  
You see the world turn'd upside down.*

A year later, songwriter Martin Parker re-appropriated the melody for the song "When the King Enjoys his Own Again." For a century and a half, the tune of "When the King Enjoys his Own Again" was so popular as "This Land is Your Land" is in today's United States. Mitchell found that "since it was performed in honor of nearly every possible occasion of national significance, the lyrics often required changing. The song was heard under titles like 'A Review of the Rebellion, Monarchy Triumph,' 'Since Hanover has Come,' and 'The Last News from France.'"

From here on, no one who has looked into the subject and shared the upshot in print owns up to anything more informed than conjecture. Some think that the British may have played "When the King Enjoys his Own Again" in return for the insult of the Article Three in the surrender document. Mitchell is one. The verses of "When the King Enjoys his Own Again" went:

*What Booker can prognosticate  
Concerning Kings or Kingdoms fate  
I think myself to be as wise  
As him that gameth on the skies  
My skill goes beyond the depths of a pond  
Or river in the greatest rain  
Whereby I tell all things will be well  
When the King enjoys his own again*

*There's neither swallow, Dove or Dade  
Can soar more high or deeper wade  
Nor show a reason from the stars  
What causeth peace or civil wars  
The Man in the Moon may wear out his shoon  
By running after Charles his wain  
But all to no end for the times will not mend  
Till the King enjoys his own again*

*Till then upon Ararat's hill  
My hope shall cast her anchor still  
Until I see some peaceful dove  
Bring home the branch I dearly love  
There I will wait till the waters abate  
Which now disturb my troubled brain  
Else never rejoice till I hear the voice  
That the King enjoys his own again*

It works for Yorktown, if not spectacularly, but the words "the world turned upside down" are nowhere to be found.

Suppose that by 1822 - or '28, if you prefer Freeman - someone determined "When the King Enjoys his Own Again" was played at Yorktown. No one has since, but suppose that 1820s person also found the 1646 incarnation of the song as "The World Is Turned Upside Down." Suppose further that the person capitalized on the discovery to retroactively hoist the British by their own petard-duping anecdotist Garden in the bargain. Too convoluted to be likely, and there are less twisty possibilities.

The world-turned-upside-down phrase appeals across time to songwriters. If it first cropped up in English music 290 years ago, it has been recycled down the centuries, and appears again so recently as 1997 in a love song released by the rock band *Alabama*. The phrase might as easily have filled a line of a Yorktown ballad.

The phrase has its prose popularizers, too. Among the early instances of it outside music is a passage in a 1630s play by Richard Brome - suggesting it was old enough a cliché to be familiar to theatergoers of the time. It is found, as well, in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, finished in 1651. Burton said: "Women wear the breeches . . . in a word, the world turned upside downward." Burton's work, perused today, was a must-read well into the 18th century. Doctor Samuel Johnson pressed it upon people who asked for reading recommendations.

James Maclay, a United States senator from Pennsylvania, employed the words in the legislative journal he kept from 1789 to 1791. When Baron von Steuben applied to Congress for his back pay as one of Washington's generals, Maclay wrote: "The baron's bill, as it was called, was taken up. Perversion of reason, perversion of principle. The world turned upside down only could justify the determinations." The baron was paid in worthless paper notes, but Maclay demonstrated the phrase's undiluted currency.

The bridges between 18th-century speech, literature, and popular music are not far to seek. If it had not by then, the phrase has since achieved the distinction of a bromide in the three arenas, notably among Australians. An Internet search with a mother-hubbard engine produced 5,250 matches. Among them is a page on a website run by by Lesley Nelson, to which John Renfro Davis contributed

<http://www.contemplator.com/england/worldtur.html>

There you can hear a recording of one 18th-century "The World Turned Upside Down" and read the lyrics of two.

One of Davis's versions appeared on the pages of London's *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1766 during the Stamp Act crisis, under the title "The Old Woman Taught Wisdom, or the World Turned Upside Down." Scholars Henry Steele Commager and Robert B. Morris give the title phrases in reverse. But they observe the song was "quite a different version from the earlier English ballad of the same title"-the one set in 1646 to what became "When the King Enjoys his Own Again."

Apart from the tune and the lyrics, the most apparent difference you hear is that "When the King Enjoys his Own Again" is in four/four time and "The Old Woman Taught Wisdom" - a variation on the tune "Derry Down" - is in six/eight.

"The Old Woman Taught Wisdom" is sometimes described as a song about a mother frustrated by an indolent adult daughter who would not pay her own way in their household, missing the connection to the unpleasantness of 1776. The mother - Goody Bull - stands for England, the daughter her American colonies. The Pitt the lyrics mention is the American friend and English statesman of that era. The song goes:

*Goody Bull and her daughter together fell out,  
Both squabbled and wrangled and made a great rout.  
But the cause of the quarrel remains to be told,  
Then lend both your ears and a tale I'll unfold.  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
Then lend both your ears and a tale I'll unfold.*

*The old lady, it seems, took a freak in her head,  
That her daughter, grown woman, might earn her own bread,  
Self-applauding her scheme, she was ready to dance,  
But we're often too sanguine in what we advance.  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
But we're often too sanguine in what we advance.*

*For mark the event, thus for fortune we're cross,  
Nor should people reckon without their good host,*



*The daughter was sulky and wouldn't come to,  
And pray what in this case could the old woman do?  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
And pray what in this case could the old woman do?*

*Zounds, neighbor, quoth Pitt, what the devil's the matter?  
A man cannot rest in his home for your clatter  
Alas, cries the daughter, Here's dainty fine work,  
The old woman grows harder than Jew or than Turk  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
The old woman grows harder than Jew or than Turk.*

*She be damned, says the farmer, and to her he goes  
First roars in her ears, then tweaks her old nose,  
Hello Goody, what ails you? Wake woman, I say,  
I am come to make peace in this desperate fray.  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
I am come to make peace in this desperate fray.*

*Alas, cries the old woman, And must I comply?  
I'd rather submit than the hussy should die.  
Pooh, prithee, be quiet, be friends and agree,  
You must surely be right if you're guided by me,  
Derry down, down, hey derry down,  
You must surely be right if you're guided by me.*

The *Gentleman's Magazine* printed the song as satire, not as sheet music. Nevertheless, "The Old Woman Taught Wisdom" might make a candidate for the Yorktown tune - if the Americans played it - except, perhaps, for that six/eight time, something approaching the joy of jig time. Six/eight time suggests nothing of Burke's "so peculiar a strain of melancholy," Thacher's "slow and solemn step," Lee's soldiers marching "with grace and precision," or even Denny's drummers beating "as if they did not care how." To six/eight time it is difficult to do more with your feet than step lively or dance.

"But this song," Mitchell wrote, "was said to have been played by the musicians of the British Sixty-fourth Foot on their retreat from Salem Bridge, February 26, 1776. If it could be proved that this particular song was featured at the Salem Bridge action, it could then be said that it was a tune familiar to British army musicians and therefore possibly played at Yorktown." Possibly it was played more slowly at Yorktown.

Possibly. But all the possibilities beg an obvious question. Every version of "The World Turned Upside Down" nominated for Yorktown honors was set to a borrowed melody. There is no suggestion the British sang the verses of the song tradition would have them play. So how would the audience know whether the musicians intended, say, the old original "Derry Down" or the newfangled "The Old Woman Taught Wisdom," or "The World Turned Upside Down?" Likewise "When the King Enjoys his Own Again." Wouldn't the tunes sound pretty much the same no matter which lyrics with which they were outfitted-or the bandsman had in mind?

There is another 18th-century adaptation of "Derry Down" with a clear claim to "The World Turned Upside Down" candidacy. It is still in six/eight time, but on the fitness of its lyrics for the Yorktown surrender, if for no better reason, it seems to be the sentimental favorite for what the British might have played. It goes:

*If buttercups buzz'd after the bee  
If boats were on land, churches on sea  
If ponies rode men and if grass ate the cows  
And cats should be chased into holes by the mouse  
If the mamas sold their babies  
To the Gypsies for half a crown  
If summer were spring  
And the other way 'round  
Then all the world would be upside down!*

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